



## *Neoliberalism, Politics and Resistance: Queer Film Festivals and the Fight against Urban Erasure*

by Theresa Heath

**ABSTRACT:** A 2017 report by UCL Urban Laboratory has testified to an intensity of closures of LGBTQIA spaces in London over the last decade, particularly those catering to queer women, the trans community and/or queer people of colour. As Skelton and Valentine have shown, LGBT spaces play an important role in identity and community formation; loss of social space therefore has a direct impact on constructions of subjecthood, and the subject's relationship to the urban. Focusing on London-based queer film festivals, this article will argue that, through the provision of material and discursive space, the queer film events constitute a strategic political tool of urban reclamation that resists material gentrification and neoliberal ideology. Furthermore, it will examine how the necessary engagement with issues of funding and corporate sponsorship intersect with festivals' obligations to provide queer space for the community.

**KEY WORDS:** film festivals; queer film festivals; neoliberalism; urban space; queer women; LGBT; LGBTQIA



In 2017 a report by UCL Urban Laboratory (Campkin and Marshall 2017) confirmed what many in the London LGBTQIA community have long been aware of: that queer social venues are closing down with increasing intensity, and that this phenomenon is, in part, attributable to urban regeneration, gentrification and inner-city transport developments. In fact, since 2006, the number of London-based LGBTQIA venues has fallen from 125 to 53, a 58% decline which has disproportionately affected spaces catering to queer women, trans folk and /or people of colour. As a result, social events for these marginalised communities have become largely peripatetic and are held in a range of venues on a weekly, monthly, or more infrequent basis. As the study suggests, the decline in LGBTQIA social space is symptomatic of neoliberal urban planning strategies which have prioritised high end accommodation and chain outlets over community space. Such developments have wrought both spatial and temporal changes to urban queer communities and altered the queer geography of the city.

As permanent queer venues have closed their doors, the number of queer film festivals and events operating nationally has grown exponentially. Across the UK, but most noticeably in the capital, grassroots and activist-led queer film festivals such as Wotever DIY Film Festival (WDIYFF) and Fringe! Queer Film and Arts Fest (Fringe!) have worked hard to provide community space and social events for counter-cultural and marginalised queer groups. Meanwhile, the long-running BFI Flare: London LGBTQ+ Film Festival<sup>1</sup> (Flare) increases its audience year on year (<[www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk)> 2016). Additionally, collectives such as Kunntinum, Club des Femmes and Queer Bee Film Festival host regular, politically and socially-focused queer and/or feminist programmes and screenings across the city. Focusing on London-based queer film festivals, then, this article will demonstrate how the queer film event has come to replace sorely-needed community space, particularly for queer women and other marginalised groups. Mobilising Judith Butler's theorisation of neoliberalism and the power of public assembly in addition to primary film festival research, it will be argued that, through the provision of material and discursive space and the dialectical relationship between them, the queer film event constitutes a political and strategic tool of urban reclamation that resists and challenges neoliberal ideology. As a result, a platform is created for women and other marginalised queer subjects to preserve and renegotiate a relationship with the urban. Despite the often temporally and spatially transient nature of the queer film festival, it will further be seen how an emerging, national queer film network ensures regular, connected social film events and engenders a thriving queer film community. Finally, I will examine what happens when the neoliberal discourses which motivate urban gentrification are necessarily adopted by film festivals, and how the pressures related to funding, corporate sponsorship and investment are negotiated by different types of festivals in relation to obligations to provide queer space for the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally dubbed Gays Own Pictures, the festival was renamed London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 1988 and BFI Flare: London LGBTQ+ Film Festival in 2014.



## QUEER WOMEN, NEOLIBERALISM AND THE METROPOLIS

The city has always presented a paradox for queer women. While, as Elizabeth Wilson (1995: 65) argues, the growth of urban life is “held to have made possible the very emergence of the homosexual identity,” discourses of gender and sexual im/propriety have nevertheless dictated how and where women may move about the public spaces of the city. As Kelly Hankin (2002: 6) notes:

In the beginning of the 20th century, unsheltered urban spaces of leisure, such as parks, beaches, and street corners, were colonised by primarily working-class men, both heterosexual and homosexual [...] without male or family escorts, women's entry into and navigation of these spaces was orchestrated by male desires and compromised by the threat of male violence.

Consequently, there are significant differences in the way that metropolitan space has been utilised by gay men and by lesbians and bisexual women. While gay men have historically had greater access to the public and semi-public spaces of the city and the requisite economic means to establish gay bars, businesses and neighbourhoods, lesbian and bisexual women have relied on a smaller and more precarious bar scene – semi-public spaces which have provided a measure of protection from the gendered violence of the streets. Continuing gendered economic disparity has meant that the lesbian bar has been particularly vulnerable to market forces, and soaring property prices in historically ‘gay’ neighbourhoods of London, such as Soho, have contributed significantly to the closure of multiple lesbian venues since 2004. Few women-oriented businesses have arisen in place of these lost venues, and those that do often experience difficulties obtaining late licenses as councils attempt to “clean up” neighbourhoods in order to maximise their investment potential (<[www.morningadvertiser.co.uk](http://www.morningadvertiser.co.uk)> 2001; 2002).

As Campkin and Marshall's research suggests, the recent spate of queer venue closures in London is partly driven by an aggressive, pro-business, neoliberal ideology which has allowed for unregulated property markets and the subsequent boom in property and land prices. Even the most successful queer bar cannot compete with the profit generated from a luxury flat, many of which are sold to overseas investors and left uninhabited. Further to this, the implementation of so-called urban renewal schemes have, according to campaigners, effectively resulted in social cleansing as local authorities terminate leases in a bid to manipulate the character of an area (Ellis-Peterson 2014). The ideology underpinning economic policies which allow for, and indeed encourage, the manipulation of urban space in favour of the most wealthy is outlined by Judith Butler in *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). Here, Butler describes how neoliberalism places queer and other marginalised subjects in positions of social and economic precarity which, it can be argued, precludes queer



communities from maintaining increasingly expensive urban community venues. For Butler (2015: 14), precarity is the logical outcome of a neoliberal rational that decentres collectivity, community and interdependence in favour of an unobtainable self-sufficiency:

Neoliberal rationality demands self-sufficiency as a moral idea at the same time that neoliberal forms of power work to destroy that very possibility at an economic level, establishing every member of the population as potentially or actually precarious, even using the ever-present threat of precarity to justify its heightened regulation of the public sphere and its deregulation of market expansion...

According to Butler, precarity is directly linked to gender norms, since those who present outside of culturally intelligible modes of gender are subject to harassment, pathologisation and violence. This stigmatisation affects employment opportunities as well as access to services such as education and health care. In this way, gender sets the conditions for who is recognised as human and therefore deserving of rights, while designating others as not-quite-human and subsequently undeserving of human rights. As Butler (2015: 34) argues: "Indeed, the compulsory demand to appear in one way rather than another functions as a precondition for appearing at all."

The neoliberal definition of subjecthood, then, depends on the delineation of good/viable bodies and bad/unviable bodies, the human and the not-quite human, just as the markets require 'failure' in order to measure and define 'success'. Queer and other 'failing' bodies become a necessary casualty of an aggressive, market-driven ideology which requires that some subjects fail in order to maintain the illusion of individual autonomy, meritocracy and self-determination. As Lisa Duggan (2003: xii) argues: "During every phase, the construction of neoliberal politics and policy in the US has relied on identity and cultural politics." Relegated to a socially and economically precarious position, it becomes impossible for the most marginalised queer subjects – women, working class queers, the trans community and/or people of colour – to operate and maintain queer space in a property market driven only by the pursuit of profit. Within this model, queers are erased from city space *and* discourses of what it means to be human.

For precariously situated subjects, including the most marginalised queers, the implications of neoliberal economics and ideology are far-reaching and profound. As Campkin and Marshall's (2017) research highlights, the heritage of queer communities is powerfully embedded in the fabric and cultures of LGBTQ+ venues which, as Valentine and Skelton (2003) demonstrate, provide "safe" spaces in the city and facilitate the formation of community and identity. For Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter (1997: 3), "Queer space enables people with marginalized (homo)sexualities and identities to survive and to gradually expand their influence and opportunities to live fully." They go on to argue (1997: 55) that our "sense of place", or subjective map, plays a key role in self ideation and the way we perceive and navigate corporeal space: "this 'sense of place' map [...] defines the points where a person's friends, lovers, potential sex partners, and



allies can be found, and where danger may exist. Experience of place involves [...] building strategies for self-expression and fulfilment." Maintaining urban queer space – maintaining a relationship *with* space – is therefore fundamental to community cohesion, self-ideation and personal safety. In the context of the rapid erosion of connection to city space it is therefore unsurprising that queer communities have looked to alternative ways of inhabiting the city, and of adapting to the growing difficulties of maintaining permanent queer venues.

#### QUEER DIY FILM FESTIVALS AS POLITICAL RESPONSE TO URBAN ERASURE

I believe it is no coincidence that, as queer venues have closed their doors, particularly those catering to women, a plethora of new LGBTQIA film festivals, collectives and events has emerged. Rooted in radical, queer, intersectional politics, festivals in this new wave are mostly volunteer-led, not-for-profit, and consciously avoid what Stuart Richards (2017) refers to as “homonormative” programming to include a high proportion of politically subversive, consciously queer, experimental or low-budget work. Committees and organising teams often include a high number of queer women and/or trans identified people from lower socio-economic and/or economically precarious backgrounds. Although a small number of festivals in this new wave are highly professional, well-funded and operate within established neoliberal business models such as Iris Prize Festival in Wales, the majority of new, UK-based queer film festivals receive limited or no public or corporate funding, and reject neoliberal business models. Over the last decade, festivals developed and operating in this way have included Fringe! (London), WDIYFF (London), Kuntinum (London), Queer Bee Film Festival (London), Club des Femmes (London), Leeds Queer Film Festival and Europe’s only QTIPOC film festival, Glitch (Scotland).

WDIYFF, which will provide a focal point and example of the model discussed above, was founded by myself and Ingo Cando<sup>2</sup> in 2012 as part of Wotever World, a London-based queer arts, performance and activism collective.<sup>3</sup> The festival was originally conceived as part of a three-day, alternative pride event aiming to challenge the corporate, hegemonic aspects of Pride London. WDIYFF works to provide a platform for marginalised and counter-cultural queer voices, including those of queer women, trans folk and QTIPOC,<sup>4</sup> as well as disabled queers and those from working class backgrounds. As such, it prioritises amateur, low-budget and DIY work, and decentres discourses of ‘quality’ in favour of marginalised voices, political messages and

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<sup>2</sup> Ingo Cando is founder of Wotever World, which has been running continuously in London since 2003 and now includes events such as Bar Wotever, Club Wotever, Queer Fayre and Female Masculinity Appreciation Society as well as Wotever DIY Film Festival.

<sup>3</sup> I have been part of the Wotever World community for over ten years, first as an attendee, then as an occasional assistant and finally as the co-founder of Wotever DIY Film Festival.

<sup>4</sup> Queer Trans and Intersex People of Colour.



experimentation. Although a comparatively small budget would practically preclude the festival from obtaining premieres of large, mainstream LGBT films, the remit of WDIYFF has always been to challenge the presumed relationship between high production values and what constitutes a 'good' film. The majority of films are selected by programmers through an open submissions process and the programme mainly comprises short and/or experimental work as well as narrative and documentary features. The first three editions were one-evening events held at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT) before the festival expanded to become a multiple day festival held at the more accessible Cinema Museum. The 2016 edition was held at both the Cinema Museum and DIY Space for London, a collectively-run activist space in south east London. WDIYFF now hosts one-off events including DIY filmmaking workshops and screenings, sometimes in collaboration with other queer film organisations.

#### TACTICS OF SPATIAL OCCUPATION

Queer film festivals such as WDIYFF deploy multiple tactics in order to occupy and re/claim urban space. Given the material erasure of the urban heritage of marginalised queer communities, and the stigmatisation of non-normative bodies and lifestyles within a neoliberal context, the gathering of queer, non-conforming bodies in the public and semi-public spaces of the urban film festival may be seen as a political act in itself:

I want to suggest that only when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space [...] they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which, in its expressive and signifying function, delivers a bodily demand for a more liveable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity. (Butler 2015: 11)

For Butler, it is the performative act of appearing collectively in the public spaces of the city that constitutes an act of resistance, a demand to be seen and recognised as subjects who are deserving of rights:

For those effaced or demeaned through the norm they are expected to embody, the struggle becomes an embodied one for recognisability [...] only through an insistent form of appearing precisely when and where we are effaced does the sphere of appearance break and open in new ways. (2015: 37)

If, as Marshall and Campkin demonstrate, queer venues are being erased from the city space and if, as Butler argues, queer bodies are excluded from urban space through discourses of material and discursive violence, then the strategic, collective appearance in public space of the queer body politic constitutes a refusal of erasure, and a transformative and political act.





Arguably, the political capital to be gained from public gathering is greater when that gathering occurs in prominent public space with a high value in the cultural hierarchy. Flare, for example, is held at the British Film Institute (BFI) on the Southbank. With Central London unaffordable for all but the most wealthy, the ten day occupation of a prestigious, central London venue visibly places queer subjects in an urban context from which they are being systematically excluded. During festival time, the BFI becomes a vibrant queer community and social space, with many of the social events and after-parties targeted at women, the trans community and/or queers of colour. For example, Club Kali, a monthly club night catering to Asian, Arab and/or Middle Eastern queers, has hosted a popular weekend club night at Flare for several years. Whether motivated by a sense of social responsibility, or a cynical drive to fill a gap in the market, the organisers of Flare recognise a need for social space catering to marginalised queer groups. In contrast, activist and grassroots festivals tend to be located in small, community-run venues. Since 2011, Fringe! has operated in the rapidly gentrifying East End of London, utilising venues such as the independent Rio Cinema and charity-run Hackney Showrooms. Similarly, WDIYFF has been held at three independent venues, all of which have strong ties to the LGBTQIA community and which are either under threat of closure or are financially precarious. WDIYFF's first home, the RVT, is one of London's longest-running LGBT venues and is currently the focus of a concerted community campaign to save it from redevelopment by property developer owners Immoveate. A similar campaign is attempting to preserve yet another WDIYFF venue, the Cinema Museum which, at the time of writing, is being sold by its current landlords, the National Health Service. The festival's most recent venue, DIY Space for London, is a cooperatively-run social centre which depends partly on revenue from the community groups who hire the space. Arguably, holding events in these types of venue and generating publicity, support and revenue, becomes part of the political project to maintain independent, counter-cultural and queer space in the face of the neoliberal economics which make it so difficult for such places to survive.

In addition to the political act of occupying material urban space, many queer film festivals, particularly small, community and activist-run events, actively attempt to reconfigure that space to better accommodate diverse bodies. Working within the ideology that disability is a queer issue, WDIYFF is committed to holding all events in wheelchair-accessible venues as well as providing captions on all films, BSL interpretation for introductions and panel discussions and audio description. In 2016 the festival also provided a relaxed, soft seating space for those who find conventional seating uncomfortable. This last measure echoes that of early women's film festivals which often attempted to map the comfort of the 'feminine' domestic sphere on to that of the masculine-associated public sphere. In this way, urban space is claimed and reconfigured in the service of a queer, feminist, intersectional project which recognises how discourses of oppression function together as part of a structural system of exclusion. This political position corresponds to Butler's (2015: 37) argument that "norms of the human are formed by modes of power that seek to normalise certain versions of the human." For Butler, gender and queer politics must align with other precarious



populations to achieve an equally liveable life and a right to occupy space. Such a project is evident at festivals prioritising, for example, disabled access.

#### URBAN SPACE IN THE QUEER CINEMATIC IMAGINARY

Queer film festivals, of course, are not simply sites of social gathering and, at the heart of the event are the films themselves, many of which engage directly with issues of queer space and urban experience. Yet within queer cinema, as in the mainstream, representation is not evenly distributed across gender, sexuality, race, class and other indices. Consequently, queer film festivals have historically and consciously engaged with this lack of representational or discursive space in the film canon and cinematic imaginary. For example, since the late 1980s, the curators of Flare have demonstrated a continuous awareness of the lacunae in queer cinema in terms of representations of lesbians and bisexual women. As early as 1987, programmers Mark Finch and Peter Packer (1) were, in the festival's printed programming, acknowledging "the economic difficulties facing lesbian filmmakers" and working to find and include lesbian-themed content in the programme, in this case Sergio Toledo's *Vera* (1986).<sup>5</sup> A decade later, programmers Briony Hanson and Robin Baker (1997: 2) noted how little had changed in terms of the lack of lesbian features available, although suggested that 1997 might represent something of a turning point: "giving cause for celebration this year are more sharp, strong lesbian features than ever before, finally beginning to redress the traditional dominance of gay work." That year the festival hosted an event titled "Zero Budget: The Search for a UK Lesbian Feature," which focused on the difficulty in obtaining funding for lesbian-themed content. Throughout its thirty-two year history, Flare has continued to draw attention to the lack of lesbian representation in queer cinema, and attempted to address this issue with lectures, workshops, mentorships and training programmes. That lesbian and bisexual women filmmakers continue to face enormous challenges securing funding for feature length work, particularly that with lesbian content, is indicative of broad structural inequalities which are deeply embedded within film culture and visual media cultures as a whole.

Gender disparity notwithstanding, queer cinema has a long and complex history of dealing with the relationship between queer subjects – and particularly queer women – and the metropolis. Cities are represented, variously, as sites of self-discovery and actualisation, of desire and community, safety and violence and as utopian or dystopic. Queer protagonists are frequently portrayed leaving the stifling parochialism of the country or conservative town to travel to the city and realise their queer identities or to find queer community, as in *Whatever Happened To Susan Jane?* (Mark Huestis, 1982), *My*

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<sup>5</sup> In fact *Vera*, which is by a male director, focuses on a FTM trans character and, as such, cannot be said to feature lesbian content. This decision can be partly explained by contemporary discourses of gender, which tended to conflate trans subjectivities with butch lesbianism, male camp and other non-normative gender expression.





*Father is Coming* (Monika Treut, 1991) *By Hook or By Crook* (Silas Howard, 2001) and *Summertime* (Catherine Corsini, 2015). At the same time, queer cinema recognises the fragility of the queer city and the tenuousness of the relationship between queer subjects and the urban. In fact, queer cinema has consistently formed part of the campaign to preserve under-threat venues, function as an archive or perform homage to lost space. Early examples of queer cinema's engagement with precariously-situated, iconic queer venues include *Last Call At Maud's* (Paris Poirier, 1993), a homage to the longest-serving lesbian bar in the world, and *Squeezebox!* (Stephen Saporito and Zach Shaffer, 2008), a documentary about the weekly, pan-sexual party that was created in opposition to the eradication of counter-cultural space in Giuliani's New York.

#### QUEER CINEMA AS ACTIVIST TOOL

As the frequency with which LGBTQIA venues are closing down in many urban centres in the West intensifies, work dealing with this spatial emergency has similarly proliferated. For example, between 2014 and 2015, Flare screened a number of documentaries and experimental features focusing on the threat to queer venues in London and other Western cities. This work included Charles Lum and Todd Verow's *Age of Consent*, a feature documentary about gay male BDSM club, The Hoist, and the looming threat of closure as a result of gentrification in London's Vauxhall area.<sup>6</sup> The same year the festival screened *Valencia: The Movie/S* (Peter Anthony et al, 2013), a collectively-directed, experimental homage to San Francisco's Mission neighbourhood, a rapidly diminishing hub of dyke and queer activism. In 2015, journalist and academic Ben Walters curated short programme "BURN: From Hackney to Vauxhall," billed as "a celebration of London's drag heritage – even as the wrecking balls circle many of its key venues." *BURN* included Tim Brunsden's 2014 documentary about the fight to save the RVT, *Save The Tavern*, which featured weekly Wotever World night Bar Wotever, an event popular with queer women and the trans community. Also in that year's programme was Kate Kunath's *We Came Here To Sweat: The Legend of Starlite* (2014) which documented the ultimately unsuccessful campaign to save the Starlite Lounge, the longest running, Black-owned, queer bar in Brooklyn.

Programming at BFI Flare tends to prioritise work with relatively high production values. Given the ongoing difficulty women filmmakers experience obtaining funding for lesbian-themed content, it is therefore unsurprising that much of the work dealing with at-risk venues selected for this festival focuses on gay male or mixed spaces. Similarly, across queer cinema, work focusing on under-threat gay male venues receives more funding and better distribution than work focusing on women's venues. 2017, for example, saw the release of documentary *The Battle Of Soho* (Aro Korol) which focused

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<sup>6</sup> While Vauxhall is an area of rapid urban development in London, when the Hoist finally did close in 2016, the owners cited personal rather than financial reasons.



on gentrification in the Soho area. Despite a significant portion of screen time being devoted to the 'LGBT' community and social spaces, the documentary fails to mention any lesbian bars, or interview any self-identified lesbian or bisexual women in connection with the decimation of the Soho lesbian scene. In an after-screening discussion at the Genesis Cinema (March, 2017), Korol stated that he did not see any difference between gays and lesbians, and had interviewed only people with whom he had organically come into contact. It is thus possible to see how such liberal, homogenising politics results in the history of lesbian urban space being itself written out of the cinematic documentation of queer urban erasure.

In contrast to the content screened at large LGBT film festivals, smaller, activist-led festivals such as WDIYFF focus on providing a platform for amateur, low and no-budget work. This type of festival is therefore more likely to showcase work pertaining to lesbian, mixed queer, trans and/or QTPOC urban space. Indeed, WDIYFF has curated a significant body of work dealing with the effects of late-stage capitalism on spaces catering to women and other marginalised queers, and the evolving relationship between diverse queer subjectivities and the urban. For example, the first, 2012 edition of the festival screened the ultra-DIY *Save The Place* (Ann Antidote, Wolha Martynenka, 2012) a Queer Feminist Network production which satirised the greed of real estate developers and offered a queer, anti-capitalist vision of a communally-run space, complete with make-your-own-dildo workshop. In 2014 a programme entitled "Community Spirit" featured Taha Hassan's *Brixton Fairies: Made Possible by Squatting* (2014) which documented the history of anti-capitalist squatting communities in Brixton in the 1980s. Hassan is himself a member of radical squatting collective The House of Brag and, as such, *Brixton Fairies* established a spatial and historical connection between the working class, white gay men of the earlier Brixton communities and the more diverse members of the House of Brag. The following year the festival hosted "Space, Place, DIY: A Three-Way Retrospective of Bev Zalcock and Sara Chambers, Val Phoenix and Krissy Mahan", curated as a direct response to the turbo-gentrification affecting formerly queer, working class or counter cultural locations in cities such as London, Berlin and New York. Included in this programme was Krissy Mahan's *Starlite Stays* (2010) a short, DIY documentary version of the fight to save the Starlite Lounge which was produced as an activist-led alternative to Kunath's feature-length documentary. Finally, the last, full-length edition of the festival in 2016 showcased crowdfunded web series *She's In London* (Katie Hall, 2015) which explored changes to the London lesbian scene as a result of gentrification in the Soho area.

In the context of an increasingly pervasive neoliberalism, the kind of DIY cinema of space centred at WDIYFF offers a politically radical critique addressing the rhetorical separation within neoliberal ideology of the cultural and social from the economic. As Duggan (2004: xiv) points out, one of the major failures of the left over the last two decades has been to accept and, in some cases, embrace this separation through the divorcing of identity politics from a critique of global capitalism. The schism between critiques of identity categories and the market is not only erroneous but a consequence of deliberate tactics which seek to obscure the workings and social implications of late



capitalism since, for Duggan (2004: xiv), “In the real world, class and racial hierarchies, gender and sexual institutions, religious and ethnic boundaries are the channels through which money, political power, cultural resources, and social organisation flow.” Categories of identity are thus inextricable from the economy and function as conduits by which economic and political power is organised. In contrast to the obfuscating drives of neoliberal ideology, the films mentioned above make visible and explicit how neoliberal economics are deliberately and systematically erasing queer and counter-hegemonic urban space whilst ideologically ensuring the social dehumanisation and economic disempowerment of those rendered materially and discursively place-less. At the same time, neoliberal ideology works to undermine discourses of community, interdependence and intersectionality which have historically provided social justice groups with their most powerful forms of resistance.

#### MATERIAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL SPACE: A DIALECTIC

The films listed above are mostly short, produced on extremely small budgets and centre queer women, QTIPOC and/or working class and radical queers. Dealing with the relationship between queer communities and urban space, this body of amateur work highlights the strategic failure of a market-driven economy to cater to the needs of marginalised communities. In response, these films advocate community, solidarity and coalition-building between precariously situated groups, a tactic which adheres to Butler’s argument concerning resistance to neoliberal ideology. Queer film festivals such as WDIYFF thus provide a discursive platform from which to represent and examine issues of gentrification within the current neoliberal context, and to explore political and activist responses to this phenomena. Moreover, an archive of the evolving relationship between city space and queerness is created, and queer urban heritage is, to some extent, preserved. Throughout this process, a relationship is established between the issues and politics depicted in the representational space of the screen, and the ephemeral, material space of the queer film festival since the festival is itself occupying space in the contested urban sphere – in this case, London. Moreover, festivals such as WDIYFF reflect the inclusive politics of queer activist cinema by altering the physical space of the festival to better accommodate diverse bodies, while free, sliding scale and pay-what-you-can ticketing structures open the space up to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Space is therefore created for those bodies most stigmatised and devalued under neoliberalism. Meanwhile, hiring independent and community-run venues contributes to their survival in the capital.

This multi-faceted approach to opening up and reconfiguring material space thus combines with radical and political short film to create a queer utopian vision of what an anti-capitalist urban environment might look like. Queer and non-normative bodies are located and fixed in an urban context both on and off screen at an event which celebrates sociality, community and interdependence, concepts which are anathema to the tenets of neoliberal ideology. In this way, the queer film festival becomes a politically



engaged site where material and representational strategies of resistance combine in a dialectical relationship through which a community and political response to neoliberalism might be formulated and mobilised.

#### EXCEEDING SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL BOUNDARIES

By providing material and discursive space to formulate political strategies for the future, the queer film festival moves beyond its spatial and temporal boundaries. In fact, queer film festivals have a habit of exceeding their boundaries and engendering new networks, festivals and communities. At the 2016 edition of Flare, for example, meetings were held between representatives from SQIFF, Bristol Queer Visions and Iris Prize Festival in Wales with the intention of developing a new group called the Queer Film Network. The aim was to create a national network of queer film exhibitors funded by the BFI via the regional Film Hubs. Funding would be made available to support national tours of queer content, and biannual meetings would provide an opportunity for member festivals to share resources and address common issues and concerns. Flare therefore provided a networking space which allowed other exhibitors to learn about the QFN and register interest.<sup>7</sup>

Queer film festivals also tend to spawn new film festivals; WDIYFF was partly inspired by Fringe!, which was itself created in response to funding cuts to the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 2011.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, such was the popularity of WDIYFF's annual queer feminist porn screening that the London Porn Film Festival was created in 2017 by Ingo Cando, founder and creative director of Wotever World. The first edition of LPFF, which has strong links with the Berlin Porn Film Festival, was held at The Horse Hospital in central London in April 2017, sold out many of its screenings and has just held an even more popular 2018 edition. In this instance, a screening of radical and counter-hegemonic images extended beyond the boundaries of the festival to create further opportunities for radical discourse in London, as well as urban queer sociality and the erotic. Consequently, queer film festivals not only engender material, urban, community space but contribute to a wider film exhibition network and queer cinematic canon within London and beyond.

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<sup>7</sup> In 2018 WDIYFF curated a QFN-funded programme exploring the intersections between queerness and disability which toured the UK in spring and which will screen at the Lesbisch Schwule Filmtage| International Queer Film Festival in Hamburg in the autumn of 2018. It is also worth noting, however, that the QFN is not democratic and a rotating chairperson role is held only by founder members. Consequently, allocation of funding each year is contingent on the festival currently holding the role of chair. For example, during the time in which Iris chaired the organisation, funding was primarily allocated to screenings of more mainstream, narrative work and was taken advantage of mostly by the larger festivals, particularly Iris itself.

<sup>8</sup> Austerity-led funding cuts in 2011 led to London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival/Flare being cut from two weeks to one week. The festival is currently ten days long.



## THE FUNDING CONUNDRUM

By screening predominantly non-mainstream content, operating at smaller venues and running on a volunteer basis, festivals such as WDIYFF, Fringe and LPFF are able to maintain relative organisational and curatorial autonomy. In contrast, and in a general climate of diminishing public arts funding (Loist 2011: 269) large, established festivals such as Flare are increasingly dependent on corporate sponsorship for their survival, which impacts programming, content and scope. Operationally, Flare corresponds broadly to what queer film festival scholar, Stuart Richards, defines as the LGBT social enterprise; that is, one which seeks out a range of funding opportunities in order to achieve social and community objectives (2017: 25). As Richards highlights through an analysis of Frameline, Melbourne Queer Film Festival and Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, the social enterprise model shapes a festival's programming, since generating ticket sales and boosting audience numbers year on year is key to sustainability and maintaining and attracting further sponsorship. It therefore becomes necessary to programme films with the widest appeal in peak slots at the largest venues. This approach may result in what Richards terms "homonormative programming", characterised by work rooted in a depoliticised consumerist ideology which reifies certain bodies and lifestyles as optimal. For Richards (2017: 143), homonormative programming is situated comfortably within the dominant hegemony and, ultimately, neoliberalism: "it just so happens that a significant proportion of the successful films adhere to homonormative identity politics, which works in the service of dominant contemporary economic and political systems."

A small survey of Flare opening night films between 2014-2017 suggests a level of adherence to such a homonormative approach. In 2014, Hong Khaou's *Lilting* (2014) portrayed a white, western man (Ben Whishaw) grieving the loss of his Chinese-Cambodian lover. 2015's festival opened with *I Am Michael* (Justin Kelly, 2015), the story of gay activist Michael Glatzer (James Franco) who renounced his homosexuality to become a Christian pastor. The following year *The Pass* (Ben Williams, 2016) depicted the mixed-race relationship between two male footballers, and in 2017 Fergus O'Brien's *Against the Law* told the story of Peter Wildblood, the only openly gay man to testify before the 1955 Wolfenden Committee. Although these films do encompass political, activist, and social history as well as intersectional critiques of race, they also feature normatively attractive, predominantly white male actors and rely on the star appeal of the lead performers to draw a Western gay male audience. Formally, each is a slick, well-produced narrative feature, a hegemonic film form which, according to Richards, corresponds to a neoliberal desire for mass profit. Finally, these films are all by male directors, focus on gay male subjectivities and centre the individual rather than the community.

A further consequence of the need to maximise ticket sales is the tendency across larger festivals to separate their gay, lesbian, trans and QTIPOC short film programmes.





Skadi Loist (2012: 168) discusses the pitfalls of such programming strategies and failure to think intersectionally in “A Complicated Queerness”:

The mere addition of representational segments on a superficial level, without integrating criticism of identity politics, perpetuates structures of inequality and discrimination based on gender/sexuality and race/ethnicity [...] Programmers and festival organisers often legitimise this decision by invoking established reception behaviours based on presumed one-dimensional identification patterns – i.e. gay men or women are said to watch only films by, for and about gay men or women, respectively.

Moreover, as Richards (2017: 173) argues, identity politics-driven programmes further work to desexualise marginal identities such as those of trans and/or PoC communities since they are separated from categories of sexuality. He further maintains that separating lesbian and gay film functions as part of a cis-normalisation which reinforces ideas of socially accepted sexualities and the hetero/homo binary.

Homonormative programming can be seen as symptomatic of the neutralisation of subcultural lifestyles in the service of a homogenising, neoliberal drive to maximise profit. However, as Richards (2017: 176-177) argues, it is also true that revenue from homonormative screenings may facilitate other programmes with more challenging content. As previously discussed, Flare also has a history of screening documentaries and experimental features focusing on the loss of queer space in London and other Western cities, work which challenges the sanctity of the markets and renders visible the detrimental relationship between neoliberalism and queer communities.<sup>9</sup> However, as Desmond Hesmondhalgh (2008: 555) points out, urban cultural entities have become absorbed into government policy and a general discourse in which their function is to contribute to the same urban regeneration boom which is fuelling rising rental and property prices. Flare therefore finds itself in the highly conflicted position of being imbricated in the very processes of gentrification exposed and protested by filmmakers within its programme. Indeed, this kind of fraught balancing act can be identified throughout the programming of many large festivals, including Flare, Hamburg’s Lesbisch Schwule Filmtage and San Francisco’s Frameline. Each festival visibly attempts, with varying degrees of success, to reconcile its corporate and financial obligations with its responsibility to marginalised queer communities.

For small, grassroots festivals such as WDIYFF, there is little pressure to programme mainstream or homonormative content, thus allowing for radical, counter-cultural programming and a focus on under-served communities. Nevertheless, the conditions within which WDIYFF operates present a unique set of logistical and ethical problems. For example, funding for the 2016 edition of the festival stood at approximately £10,000

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<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that early editions of Flare, and at least until 2000, were highly political and showcased a significant proportion of radical activist film as well as featuring a high proportion of mixed short programmes.





and was awarded by government-funded bodies Awards for All (Big Lottery Fund) and Film London, as well as corporate philanthropy fund, the Lush Community Pot. The Big Lottery Fund award stipulated that the festival be offered free, but would not cover wages for festival organisers. While this ensured that the festival was able to attract economically marginalised audiences, there was no means of meaningfully paying volunteers and organisers for their time since no profits were generated from ticket sales. This type of funding predicament is common, and places festival organisers in a problematic position practically and politically, since the continued running and success of the festival relies on the self/exploitation of festival workers. As Loist (2011) notes, even when queer film festival staff are salaried they generally hold down multiple jobs and consistently live in positions of economic precarity. This situation ensures that community-run, queer film festivals tend to last only as long as organisers are able to work for free or very little, with many experiencing 'burn out.' For example, at WDIYFF, inability to properly financially remunerate organisers resulted in a level of exploitation and self-exploitation which was in itself politically problematic and which ultimately put an end to full-length versions of the festival for the foreseeable future. Moreover, the festival was unwittingly adhering to Cameron-era Conservative party discourses of the 'Big Society' in which communities provide services formerly administered by the state. Finally, the pressure on smaller, London-based queer film festivals is exacerbated by increasing venue hire fees along with the rising cost of living, compelling festival workers to prioritise paid work over volunteer and community organising.

## CONCLUSION

When queer subjects attend a film festival they are interpellated into a community or counter-public which, according to Michael Warner (2002), is dependent on the connection and relationship between subjects. Since the antithesis of neoliberalism is collectivity and interdependence, and given the counter-hegemonic nature of the counter-public, this performative act of queer collectivity in the urban public sphere constitutes a challenge to the dominant socio-economic order. For Butler, this performative act of assembly in public spaces asserts the right of queer bodies to appear, to inhabit urban space and to be considered part of the urban community. I have argued that, through the dialectic between the material and the representational, a radical space is created at queer film festivals for queer collectives to formulate strategies of resistance to neoliberal erasure in both the city space and mainstream film and media. In a city such as London, where unfettered property markets and turbo gentrification are a key factor in the demise of queer venues, the queer film festival or event has assumed a particularly urgent role. As I have further demonstrated, the political potential of queer film festivals is not confined to one specific event or location and, rather, extends beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the festival to help create new events and networks nationwide. As such, queer film festivals perform in dialogue with one



another to facilitate multi-layered, evolving urban queer space in addition to creating and sustaining queer cultures and preserving queer urban heritage.

Urban queer film festivals may therefore pose a direct challenge not only to free markets, which have seen community space sold off to the highest bidder, but to a neoliberal rational which devalues community and designates certain bodies as unproductive, expendable and undeserving of a place in the city. However, as I have also discussed, both large, well-established festivals and small, DIY events must negotiate a significant balancing act. A festival like Flare must balance the cinematic privileging of white, male, cisgender voices with its additional obligation to provide a platform for women, the trans community, disabled queers and/or people of colour. At the same time, its very role in 'creative industries' discourse confers specific expectations, notably regarding the festival's role in the marketing and image of London. Similarly, DIY festivals like WDIYFF must find ways to reconcile their radical, anti-capitalist politics with the inevitable consequences this has for sustainability and the exploitation of festival volunteers. At the time of writing, we at WDIYFF are still debating ways to run the full festival whilst remaining committed to our audience and values.

Much stands to be lost if queer film festivals, and particularly community-run, activist events, are no longer able to function. Festivals such as WDIYFF, LPFF, Glitch and Leeds have each demonstrated a consistent commitment to centring the voices of the most marginalised in the community and to creating accessible events. Moreover, recognising that access to and movement around city space is regulated according to multiple vectors, these festivals attempt to reconfigure physical space so that it may be accessible and comfortable to non-normative bodies and precariously situated subjects, thus making visible the intersections between, for example, queerness, disability and economic background. Since queer women, QTPOC, the trans community, working class queers and/or disabled queers are among the subjects most devalued by discourses of neoliberalism, DIY queer film festivals are subsequently some of the few spaces where these subjectivities can be centred and celebrated. In the context of increasingly neoliberal and right wing governments across Europe and North America, discursive and material space has become fiercely contested and opportunities for optimism few. Nevertheless, through the platforming of subversive lives, bodies and politics, along with the political reconfiguration of material space, I believe the queer film festival event may yet provide part of a model or blueprint for an alternative vision of a more open and accessible city.

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